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ABSTRACT

This paper advises poetry readers to get rid of the inhibitions that the search for conventional meaning creates, by invoking the tenet that "a poem must not mean but be." The paper presents and analyzes several poems, maintaining that good poetry is an honest presentation of real experience that rarely offers information about any short-term solution of problems and thus precludes, in most cases, any reduction to a saying or a single "meaning." The paper also says that poetry, with its highly metaphorical expressions and especially compacted form, is much like scientific language, which uses numbers and symbols as tools to get at some truth that ordinary discourse is unable to do. Such "focused" languages as poetry and science communicate or transmit messages as if incidentally. The paper concludes that understanding and appreciating poetry's special language requires a "suspension of disbelief," whereby readers enter the experience with open minds and ready participation. (RL)

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WHY IS POETRY DIFFICULT?

Barry Wallenstein

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Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.

--T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

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I.

Artists are known to be the most underpaid specialists in America, and poets, more than others, bear the brunt of public indifference. As one of Ezra Pound's more celebrated personae, H.S. Mauberley, is advised by the practical-minded Mr. Nixon:

> "...no one knows, at sight, a masterpiece.
> And give up verse, my boy,
> There's nothing in it."

Of course, Pound did find somthing in it, but the question remains as to why the Mr. Nixon's, why much of John Q. Public, still and perhaps more than ever, find poetry unrelated to the "real stuff of life." Its purpose seems unfathomable, or at best, dubious, and its meaning "difficult" to ascertain.

For some time now, our approach to reading has reflected the modern utilitarian bias. We are in a way conditioned to find poetry difficult or strange because it often appears to have no concrete or ulterior purpose. The printed word is now expected to convey information and poetry seems not to meet this expectation, nor does it provide an easy escape into fantasy. Thus, a common defense is to construct difficulties in the reading--or non-reading--of it.

Poets continue to find it distressingly ironic that the would-be or could-be audience is so estranged from the life of poetry when in fact ordinary lives and everyday situations are the source material for the tensions and realities that are the concern of poetry. It is doubly ironic that people should be defensive in the presence of poetry when poetic devices are heard and responded to all the time--in advertising, in pop songs, in religious services, and in countless other manifestations of figurative language. Every-

one reacts to these language forms in their own way and without inhibitions.

For example, the use of irony in popular Blues lyrics is often as subtle as in any literary poem, but it is absorbed and understood even as is the hyperbole of advertising rhymes. In W.C. Handy's "Beale St. Blues," the blind man "on the corner who sings the Beale St. Blues," says, "'I'd rather be here than any place I know.'" The beauty of the lines comes out of an emotional complex of misery and satisfaction. The song ends with a further reversal of idea, which is at the same time a little ambiguous and humorous: "'I', goin' to the river, by and by/ 'Cause the river's wet and Beale St.'s done gone dry."

This is similar to the rich kind of paradox and irony found in Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," where the beauty and wonder of the silent urn seem to rely on its rigid immovability or lifelessness. At the end of the poem the urn breaks into voice with its platitudinous, yet mystifying, observation. These ironies move towards comedy even while, in both the Blues song and the Romantic ode, our consciousness is directed towards the tragic or sad within experience.

Irony is just one way the poet draws the reader in, and it functions similarly in the most diverse kinds of poetry. As everyone knows, in addition to devices of indirection such as irony and understatement, internal music or rhythm (metrics) also occurs in poetries with all kinds of intentions:

> Full fathom five thy father lies
> of his bones are coral made

or

Here we go round the mulberry bush
the mulberry bush
the mulberry bush

or

Let us go then you and I
When the evening is set out against the sky

or

One two, button my shoe
three four, open the door
five six, pick up sticks.

Another characteristic associated with poetry is its tendency to penetrate and expose emotional states, whether in the form of witty, yet passionate, seduction, as in Marvell's well-known "To His Coy Mistress," or in the violent images and deeply comtemplative tones of Blake's "The Tyger." How primary this aspect of elemental emotional release is can be observed too in the chants of Tribal peoples, such as in this hunting song of the Gabon Pygmy:

Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the forest where no one passes but you
hunter, lift up your heart, leap & walk:
meat in front of you, the huge piece of meat
the meat that walks like a hill
the meat that makes the heart glad
the meat that we'll roast on our coals
the meat into which our teeth sink
the fine red meat & the blood we drink smoking.

Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

or in the very special poetry of children:

I was dancing along,
and the dance picked up,
and I kicked up.

And I was dancing
and the dance came back.
It couldn't go away.
I tried to get away,
but it kept coming back.

No one would worry over the difficulties of the Pygmy chant or the poem by the fourth grader because the need to translate these isn't a consideration. But, with seventeenth century love poetry or the visionary lines of Blake, we wonder about what to make of it, as if it had to be made into something else perhaps more informative, and reading thus becomes a chore. What is difficult about poetry for some people is its mode or philosophy of communication, rather than its actual substance.

The poet is an artist who does his work fairly insulated from the market place and the general public, yet his work at its best is purported to reflect and even mold the society at large. It may be this very suspicious role as interpreter or shaper that causes some people to be uncomfortable around poetry. We'd like to believe against our common wisdom that our lives are clear and in need of neither interpreters or recasting.

This is indeed a romantic image--of the poet as visionary prober of life, possessed of special knowledge and in Baudelaire's words, "a happiness superior to that of ordinary folk." As if this weren't enough, he compares poets to "founders of colonies, the pastors of peoples, missionary priests exiled to the ends of the earth."

In my view, just what the poet does is somewhat different from Beaudelaire's representation, but no less challenging or inspiring. The poem, once come to terms with, acts as a verbal

model of freedom. It can instantly be at odds with the orderly and predictable modes of behavior and thinking in that it demonstrates ways of seeing the world that haven't been through the mill of practical acceptance. Since the language of poetry is highly metaphorical, it is free-wheeling in its tendency to invent finely perceived relationships, or unusual connections between disparate experiences and ideas. It is a subversive language which many manage to defuse by regarding it as "crazy talk" or ivory tower babble.

William Carlos Williams is a good example of a modern poet whose writing most distinctly springs from his harmony with ordinary people. He writes in a direct style about the most ordinary things. One poem of his, the final section of "January Morning," reads

> All this--
> was for you, old woman.
> I wanted to write a poem
> that you would understand.
> For what good is it to me
> if you can't understand?
> But you got to try hard--
>
> But--
> Well, you know how
> the young girls run giggling
> on Park Avenue after dark
> when they ought to be home in bed?
> Well,
> that's the way it is with me somehow.

The language is very clear, even simple, though the parts before and after the "But--' each seem to head in their own direction. The first half is towards the woman addressed, the second half is inward towards the speaker. Yet, the tone in both parts

is the same, which might make the poem disconcerting for some readers. However, it is this tone and the general manner of apparently off-hand speech that should lead the reader to start tying the two halves of the lyric together and reach the final point in the last two lines where the poem makes its unified effect as one piece.

With the grand manner of the opening line, the possibly ironic setting off of "All this--," the formal yet familiar address, we are into direct though emotionally charged speech, an honest view of the speaker's work as a poet. Then, though there is a rather sudden shift to the didactic, maybe even a condescending injunction about trying hard to understand his poetry, ~~he tries to~~ the poet illuminates what "this" may mean in the more personal section of the poem, which is really about his personal aesthetics. Since his poetic activity is likened to an image of careless abandon, some naughty but innocent play of body and mind, we may understand his making of poems also to be improvisatory, quirky and free as the children. He suggests his craft is as full of mystery as their lives. The poem behaves as its aesthetic dictates, with an apparent lack of clear logic. The second stanza does seem at first reading to be a non-sequitor and its seeming formlessness too adds to this effect.

In this context "you got to try hard" indicates that you've got to surrender to the poem's free mood, to its very particular and individual way of moving or getting on with whatever it's about. And this means actually succumbing to the poem's own world. At the same time, of course, the aware reader maintains an intellectual distance or ironic sense of the gap between his own reality

and the poem's. The desire to remain enclosed in fixed systems of belief and patterns of emotional awareness makes this process of meeting the poem head on burdensome.

MachLeish's famous saying, "A poem must not mean but be," is still a valuable phrase for reminding us to get rid of the inhibitions that the search for conventional meaning creates. Another way of thinking about one's relationship with a poem is to compare what a poem "means" to what an ordinary happening may mean. In both situations the question of meaning is complex but really beside the point. For example, imagine being caught in a traffic jam on a hot muggy day. There are standstills that last as long as ten or fifteen minutes, during which there is time to observe other annoyed hot faces. They are all quite new to you, yet oddly recognizable. You may fantasize about things totally removed from the scene, you may get a little lost in the radio. If when you arrive home and perchance relate this experience of the recent past, no one is likely to ask you what it meant, or means. Instead, the questions, if there are any, will have to do with how you felt in it, or what it looked like or sounded like. Your story may have contour and form, possibly may even seem more heightened than the actual episode. The poem is very much like you and the traffic jam. It, if it is good, is an honest presentation of real experience that rarely offers information about any short-run solution of problems. It precludes reduction to a saying, or a single meaning, in most cases.

If one reacts to poetry as primary experience, letting its shape, sound and sequence gratify the senses, there is no need to ask what it is about any more than there is a need to ask what

a love affair is about, or a beautiful or ugly scene, or even a piece of music. We simply react to them, enjoy or suffer them. In poetry, aboutness questions tend to strip poems of their texture, their tone, and most seriously, their often complex emotional life.

In another poem by Williams, "Danse Russe," we can see how the aboutness question only leads away from the poem entirely:

If I when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,--
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be onely,
I am best so!"
If I admire my arms, my face
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,--

Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?

If asked what this poem is about, the answer might be, "It's about how the poet feels about being alone." But how does he feel? Happy or tragical? Both are suggested and more besides. The poem is more of an exploration into feeling than a report about how something felt. The immediacy of this exploration tends to make past tense wonderings inappropriate. In the moments of experiencing the poem itself, a pattern of complex emotions is unravelling before us. Nothing is really settled so it cannot in any specific way be about anything, but it is something.

The poem moves through various tones, all most personal, despite the lyric formality of lines 4-6. But, they are resolved with a public voice, the final couplet, which is a reaching out to be judged by anyone who may not grasp the peculiar justice or rightness of the speaker's ecstasy, his unashamed narcissism. The poem lives in between its outward gesture (even though the final question is mainly rhetorical) and the main body of the poem which is personal, comtemplative, a bizarre celebration of the self.

One device that makes the poem happen rather than mean is the fact of its being all in the conditional tense. This "ifness" makes all that follows somewhat fantastical, as in an elaborate daydream. The opening domestic portrait, which is calm and pleasurable and almost unaffected by the first "if," is by the 4th line totally set off balance and the reader must shift with the shift in language from the mundane first 3 lines to the romantic and beautiful nature image, visually and musically. The first 3 lines soar, but the reader need not be jolted unpleasantly. Latent in the image of the sleeping wife and child is the image of nature lyrically perceived. Also the initial "if" places the action in the mind of the speaker and thus permits all the shifts we must go along with.

Next, the poem moves inward. The dramatic self-portrait dominates the rest of the piece until the closing 2 lines. But this portrait too is not static and changes direction in such a way as to suggest a major paradox, which is, a rhapsodizing on loneliness. It is this paradox that often gives readers a hard time for it complicates the what's it about process. Here, the speaker is not

giving news, but taking us on a trip that is rich in both details and range of feelings. We all recognize these feelings except that the poet's juxtapositioning is not our own, that is, until we have experienced the poem, Recognizing and fitting into the speaker's juxtapositioning is the active task of reading poetry.

The first image is of the speaker exuberantly acting most free and gay in the privacy of his house, yet with the consciousness that even this innocent act, in its freedom and joy, may actually be suspect. The "Who shall say..." of the ending explicitly corroborates the burgeoning defensive tone. After the first image, there is a shift in the middle of his celebration, which will turn quite sensual by the end. He exclaims, even more definitely than in his overall proclamation of joy, that he is lonely and he repeats the word three times before crying, "I am best so!" We believe this intensity and feel the strange truth of such a statement before and beyond our understanding of what this paradox might mean.

Conjecturing that loneliness is indeed a desired state, for it is the contemplative state out of which this rich poetry issues, leads to an analysis of paradoxical meaning that is beside the point. After all, the speaker believes what he is saying and it becomes as true to the reader as his or her sense of the tragic movement of life visible in every lush presentation of nature or in every shining eye of youth. For what is this about? Tanscience? Guilt? Happiness? Loneliness? We become immersed in the imponderables of being happy and lonely at the same time, or rather in his happiness and loneliness.

But while being so immersed in what could become a conumdrum, we are instead led in another direction by the poem's final challenge. Who shall say I can't feel and fancy the way I do? This is the challenge of poetry as it follows its own directions and laws somewhat independently of the local or cultural rationale. Who shall say I must make the same kind of sense you make or order my life in any prescribed fashion? Following Williams' shifting images and proposals involves a kind of sacrifice of the security of the already accepted. However, it is this yielding that opens the reader to the beauty and magic of fresh insight. The reader must participate, for one lazy moment and he will lose "Danse Russe."

II.

Our primary language is the basic communicative one, where the business of getting a message across, rather than exactitude of expression, is most essential. It's a language most rich in its possibilities and range, but it is inclined to be so loose and informal that many things it says often need repeating.

Another kind of language, which grows out of the basic one, or indeed, is developed simultaneously with it, is the language of exploration that is used in both poetry and science. These are focussed languages; they communicate or transmit messages as if incidentally. For instance, the mathematician or physicist uses numbers or ~~abstractions~~ symbols as tools to get at some truth that the language of ordinary discourse is unprepared to do. The poet too, in his search, not for self-expression (this is not of concern to the reader in any poem), but for a particular kind of truth, uses a

special language consisting of highly metaphorical expressions and an especially compacted form. Together these formal devices or structures investigate and propose truths about our emotional life, the moral content of life, and the apparently infinite ways of perceiving such truths.

Understanding and appreciating this special language means relinquishing the tight grasp on ordinary discourse, the domain and material of which is conscious awareness. For, the creations of poetry and the inspirations of science operate on a pre-conscious or subconscious level. Thus, many scientific or poetic findings seem odd, especially at first. It has been cited by both poets and scientists that before the actual developing and crafting of ideas, they intuit their discoveries. For both, there seems to be a pattern of inevitability which makes each stage of operations, or each stanza and line, necessary and right in its assigned place. This is the developmental necessity that makes poems' endings both surprising and satisfying at the same time, as if you expected it all along but didn't know till the end.

Also, just as scientific discovery is often pitted against prior notions of some fixed truth, poetry generally operates in a spirit free of absolutes. When ordinary language--conversation, journalism, non-fiction prose--discusses a particular subject, for example, an outlaw such as Joey Gallo or Jesse James, the words are judged on their attitude, clarity or information about the criminal. On the other hand, in poetry, very often in ballads, to use a concrete example, criminal figures are frequently made into heroes, and no one condemns the poet. These poems are en-

joyed not for their attitude toward crime, but because that special language of poetry takes us beyond our logical and predictable responses into some subconscious realm where we are more open to the forbidden, such as the criminal. Identifications with the criminal, as with the paradoxical aspects of self-love and loneliness, are hardly ever made in ordinary discourse. In other words, poetry taps the truths most people would allow as part of their emotional lives but deny in their social lives on account of the conventions of ordinary language and custom.

The poet is sitting at his window somewhat absent-mindedly observing a building across the street, Robert Lowell begins his poem, "The Opposite House," simply and directly:

> All day the opposite house
> an abandoned police stable,
> just an opposite house
> is square enough--six floors

and then goes on to further describe what he is looking at:

> six windows to a floor,
> pigeons ganging through
> broken windows and cooing
> like gangs of children tooting
> empty bottles.

But, while we can agree on the general meaning of these lines, we also understand that there are further possible ways of understanding what these words do and signify, as they begin to create a character, the speaker, as well as a scene described. In fact, the description is vital primarily in terms of how the speaker is discovered and felt by us.

Lowell's poem may be understood as a process that demonstrates how an individual deals with an experience. The process is a record

of a growing awareness. Actually, the poem itself creates the awareness, both for the author as he writes and refines it, and for the reader as he reads and understands it.

In the first stanza of "The Opposite House," we sense that the speaker feels safe. His voice projects a kind of bored casualness, a detachment. He is more caught up in the repetitious geometrics of his view than in the explosive possibilities of the scene. The last four lines, however, are more demonstrative, and though the sounds are cute and cosy, some violence is prefigured.

In the second stanza, the poem suddenly shifts as the speaker conveys a fresh and slightly unsettling vision:

> Tonight, though, I see it shine
> in the Azores of my open window.
> Its manly, old-fashioned lines
> are gorgeously rectilinear.
> It's like some firework to be fired
> at the end of the garden party,
> some Spanish casa, luminous
> with heraldry and murder,
> marooned in New York.

Though violence is present it is romanticized, more melodramatic than actual. The speaker is merely transferring his view, perhaps to give color to an otherwise dull aspect or to forstall the true and less spectacular dangers. The phrase, "gorgeously rectilinear," betrays the describer, for anyone who describes an ordinary squared-off building as "luminous/ with heraldry and murder" does not see or allow the reality of city terror. Throughout the second stanza the speaker is playing with violence, giving it a Spanish setting, removing it further from his window view. However, the poem does shift slightly as it brings us back home with "marooned in New York."

In the final stanza, the perspective gets closer to city real-

ity as the view moves down to the street and the speaker drops his defenses, revealing a deeply unsettled state of mind:

> A stringy policeman is crooked
> in the doorway, one hand on his revolver.
> He counts his bullets like beads.
> Two on horseback sidle
> the crowd to the curb. A red light
> whirls on the roof of an armed car,
> plodding slower than a turtle.
> Deterrent terror!
> Viva la muerte!

The political life crashes through as that careless speaker of the first stanza who has enjoyed the liberty of fancy musings is jolted into the current scene. The memory of Spain lingers, only now it is transformed into a real, though distant, horrifying cry. It is as if the emotions released by the indication of some commonplace New York City violence, its arbitrary appearance, the terrible design beneath its workings, has uncovered a nerve in the poet and forced the connection between some unheard cry of the moment and the far away, almost forgotten cry of oppression.

This poem offers no political message nor does it sermonize on public violence, but this much at least is implied: even from the safety of one's opposite view, the real events that compose our soical lives will not be denied, the "deterrent terror" dissipates the complacency of artifice. And, most interestingly, this awareness comes to both the speaker of the poem and the reader through the progress of the poem itself.

This is what the poem "does"--how it happens, to this reader at a particular reading. If I look at it again, another set of views may suggest themselves. If you ask what it is about;--violence, complacency, New York City--these will not be satisfactory

answers. If, however, you ask how it behaves, you will force yourself to see how it is the evolution of a dramatic self-portrait, a process of thought and observation which is, no doubt, foreign to your own way of musing. The experience of the poem bears a subtle and inexplicable relation to what is called "real" experience for the end product is the imagined or created experience.

In poetry, the language serves as a vehicle of entertainment, where its display often matters more than the poem's own subject. Paradoxically, this display, in its variety of intellectual guises, is able to create in the poem and the reader many complex feelings, even when the language appears quite straightforward. Sometimes it is the fear of openly confronting another's emotional and intellectual life that causes the difficulties in ostensibly easy poems.

For instance, Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" gives pleasure and is a poem not because of its subject or the depth of the author's feeling. Rather, the poem's language, the dynamics of the words, permit us to penetrate feelings that cannot be summed up or even known by any other means. This becomes clear if we observe what the language is doing in the poem, other than talking about death:

> Because I could not stop for Death
> He kindly stopped for me--
> The Carriage held but just Ourselves--
> And Immortality.

We slowly drove--He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility--

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess--in the Ring--
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain
We passed the Setting Sun--

Or rather--He passed Us--
The Dews drew quivering and chill--
For only Gossamer, my Gown--
My Tippet--only Tulle--

We paused before a House that seemed
A Sweeling of the Ground--
The Roof was scarcely visible--
The Cornice--in the Ground--

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity--

From the opening stanza we must submit to a strange world which sounds either infantile, in that the form and rhythms are like a nursery rhyme; or crazed, where death is spoken of in terms suggestive of courtship and pleasure. The word "immortality" though, removes this innocent-sounding allegorical metaphor from the mundane, indeed! The major paradox of the poem hits us as the speaker seems pleased to die, or at least unwilling to get on with serious concern over the thought of death. In psychological terms, the speaker is using language to mask feelings that are truly terrify- to her. In fact, the first stanza begins the poem's drama not between a human being and Death, which seems already settled by the outset, but between a human with very complex feelings about her life or its temporality, and the words and tones her language permits her to use about these feelings. It is as if the subject creates a challenge for words to bend to, and if words are flexible

enough to reach beyond the subject, they may also create a new perspective or awareness about the nature of the true subject. This is Dickinson's relationship to her words and her freedom to let words convey tones and attitudes really quite foreign to the way we generally imagine any inquiries into death.

The second stanza continues the courtship fantasy. The tone is relaxed and the thought is of submission; the pain and fear of submission is nowhere hinted at. This cool language, so inappropriate to the subject and the underlying terror of the poem, must be creating tensions most readers are not conscious of feeling. Again, this is Dickinson's dramatic method. The talk conveys one meaning, but gives rise to feelings which, when realized, cut across the apparent tone of voice.

The third stanza continues the death ride, still in the basic nursery rhyme tone of the start. Only now, the rhythms are breaking up somewhat, and the images which are mostly happy, are beginning to show the internal drama which includes revulsion as part of the courtship scene. The image of children striving in a ring is so bewildering, in terms of the conventional images of children playing during recess, that Dickinson's editor actually changed the word "striving" to "playing" and removed the word "ring" as well. He possibly was responding to the disturbing, albeit subterranean, notion of life's limits suggested by the poet's odd turn of phrase.

The drama climaxes in the fourth stanza where the speaker, as if in mid thought, realizes that what is going on is not as it appeared or felt in the first three stanzas. Suddenly she is not

moving, the progress of affairs is an illusion and she is rigid in a chilling atmosphere, stunned in her bridaly gown, which here feels like a shroud. The mask of childlike language is abandoned in this stanza and all prior speech, whether to herself or to an audience, takes on an extreme irony or an attitude reflecting her own way of dealing with life, which is furious, ingenious and disturbing.

It is no wonder the editor omitted the fourth stanza of this poem when it was published as "The Chariot." Its meaning is not so difficult, but to penetrate that part of her vision, the most courageous, the most naked, where she seems to break off one poem and begin another, is most difficult. Somehow our lives are at stake in that readjustment of perception.

The fifth stanza returns to the melody of the opening and likewise is coolly descriptive of a death site, a grave mound. Here, as at the start, the tone and rhythm demonstrate little emotion or mask it. But the fourth stanza is still an essential part that now directs us into the nature of the poet's awareness of death, and the last stanza presents the inevitable close. The formal comfort of religious faith is immortality, though it is the human sense of human time that controls the language even here.

The poem, though certainly presenting a most complex emotional and intellectual life, is not mystifying whenone is receptive, not necessarily to understanding Dickinson's ideas about death, but to the way the poet unravels a set of emotions through a complex pattern. This dynamic pattern, over and above the poem's meaning,

pulls us close to the art and connects us with the immortality of another's imagination and spiritual life.

In the reading of good poetry, partly because of its form, partly because of the technical requirements of content, and also perhaps because of the reader's experience, the suspension of disbelief necessary to enter another world is in operation from the start. No matter how metaphorical or imaginative a piece of written prose may be, we tend not to automatically approach it with this kind of faith. As soon as the experienced reader sees the form, he or she makes a covenant: the reading or intellectual self is prepared to experience the special kind of pleasure that poetry affords, since he or she enters the experience with open mind and ready participation.